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Deposited in DRO:

07 September 2015

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Wignall, L. and McCormack, M. (2017) 'An exploratory study of a new kink activity : "pup play".', Archives of sexual behavior., 46 (3). pp. 801-811.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0636-8>

Publisher's copyright statement:

The final publication is available at Springer via <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0636-8>

Additional information:

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“It’s a break from being you I guess”: An exploratory study of a new kink activity

ABSTRACT

This study presents the narratives and experiences of 30 gay and bisexual men who participate in a behavior known as “pup play.” Never empirically studied before, we use in-depth interviews and a modified form of grounded theory to describe the dynamics of pup play and develop a conceptual framework with which to understand it. We discuss the dynamics of pup play, demonstrating that it primarily consists of mimicking the behaviors and adopting the role of a dog. We show that the majority of participants use pup play for sexual satisfaction. It is also a form of relaxation, demonstrated primarily through the existence of a “headspace.” We classify pup play as a kink, and find no evidence for the framing of it as a form of zoophilia. We call for further research on pup play as a sexual kink and leisure activity from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

KEY WORDS: bdsm, kink, pup, play, role-play

INTRODUCTION

This research provides an examination of a behavior that has never been empirically studied before—pup play. With a growing online presence (e.g. “what is human pup play,” 2015), pup play (also known as puppy play) refers to a form of role-play in which adult humans adopt characteristics that mimic the behavior of young dogs. Normally framed as a kinky sexual activity, individuals tend to adopt a submissive role, imitate the posture of a dog, and wear a collar and other “gear” associated with owning a dog. On websites created by and for “pups,” pup play is distinguished from other animalistic fetishes, such as pony play, by emphasizing the importance of intimacy, relaxation and forms of social play (“Puppy play 101,” 2015). Here, the temporary creation of a new world of meaning alongside emphasis on fun and “simple, carefree existence” (“Puppy play 101,” 2015) mirrors how play is conceptualized more generally (e.g. Kelly, 2012), albeit with a sexual component.

The origins of pup play as a behavior are unclear, not least because of its emergence in many different countries (see “World Pup Play,” 2015). However, online resources demonstrate an increase in events for those who engage in pup play (“International Puppy Contest,” 2015), as well as resources about how best to do it (Daniels, 2003). In this literature, there is limited evidence that suggests it has developed as a subcultural community predominantly among urban gay men in metropolitan cities in the Western world (Bieschke, 2015). However, it is not possible to make definitive claims about the origins and current status of pup play given the absence of academic research on the subject.

The sole time pup play has been discussed in the academic literature, it was framed as a form of zoophilia (Aggrawal, 2011). The author developed his own taxonomy of zoophilia, and presented pup play as a “Class 1 form of zoophilia” because it was assumed that “the thought of having sex with animals excites them” (p. 34). However, websites and blog posts written by people in the pup community contend that pup play does not involve sex with real

animals, nor do the individuals involved have any desire to have sex with real animals (“Puppy play 101,” 2015).

Given the absence of empirical research on pup play, it is not currently possible to classify the behavior. Since pathological classifications of consensual sexual acts are increasingly contested (see Gerbasi et al., 2008; Langdridge, 2006; Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling, 1999), this exploratory study examines the experiences of gay and bisexual men participating in pup play by analyzing their narratives in order to develop an understanding of the activity that is rooted in their experiences (see Rehor, 2015). Using existing classificatory schema for Sadomasochism (SM) (Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984) and serious leisure (Newmahr 2011), we contend that pup play is a distinct kink and call for further research to help understand this activity.

Sex in a Sexualized Society

Diverse forms of sexual desire and identity have become highly visible in the internet age, potentially rendering sex less shocking and resulting in a “democratization of desire” (McNair, 2013, p. 15). Attitudes toward non-marital sex have liberalized (Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2015); casual sex in the form of “hooking up” has become prevalent in many youth cultures (Bogle, 2008); pornography and other sexually explicit media are easily accessible (Edelman, 2009); and sex is a common topic of conversation between friends and in the media (Evans & Riley, 2014).

Alongside a greater acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (Keleher & Smith, 2012), liberal attitudes toward sexuality have resulted in a fundamental shift in societal perception of and rationale for sexual intercourse (Treas, Lui & Gubernskaya, 2014). No longer viewed as primarily for procreation, there is a focus on the recreational and pleasurable aspects of sex instead (Twenge et al., 2015). Framing sex as a leisure activity,

Attwood and Smith (2013) conceptualize “leisure sex” as a way of understanding the significance of these social changes related to contemporary sexual practice.

The conceptual power of framing sex as a leisure activity is that it highlights the flaws of medicalized frameworks. Here, sexual acts were judged through a lens of risk, focusing on perceived physical and moral “damage,” a process heavily influenced by social stigma that reinforced hierarchies of sexuality in society (Rubin, 1984). In the leisure model, however, sexual acts are ranked as part of a complex social structure in which pleasure and risk are balanced. Supporting this approach, in her analysis of group sex across cultures, Frank (2013) demonstrates how sexual activity can be used for both positive and negative reasons, with a range of social and psychological effects; she argues that diverse theoretical tools are required to understand sexuality. Indeed, medical approaches still have value, for example related to positive sexual health practices, yet the leisure framework enables a more considered and progressive approach to evaluating diverse forms of sexual activity (Attwood & Smith, 2013; Newmahr, 2010).

There are competing ways of how to understand sex as a leisure activity—most notably, whether it is a form of casual or serious leisure. Stebbins (2001, p. 305) defines an act of *casual leisure* as an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.” It includes social play, passive entertainment and basic sensory stimulation such as eating or drinking. *Serious leisure* is distinct from casual forms through recognition of the significant time and energy that can be devoted to leisure activities (Stebbins, 2007). It can include activities such as long-distance running, rock climbing and surfing (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Newmahr (2010) usefully described six defining features of serious leisure: 1) a unique ethos of the activity; 2) a personal identification with the leisure activity; 3) the need for perseverance; 4)

effort required to learn the activity; 5) durable benefits of the activity; and 6) the possibility to pursue the activity as a career.

While seeking to move beyond the casual/serious dichotomy of leisure, Attwood and Smith (2013, p. 330) suggest that labelling sex as serious leisure helps to recognize both the recreational components of sex and the importance it maintains in individuals' lives. They argue that sex has "significant benefits (and costs) for individuals and society, offering considerable potential for productivity, development of skills and knowledge, and thereby might engender self-confidence, identity and community through achievement." Importantly, the notion of serious leisure enables consideration of diverse sexual practices beyond the medical model of sex, yet within the broader context of the sexualization of society (Attwood, 2006).

The Serious Leisure of Kinky Sex

The framing of sex as a form of leisure is particularly germane to kinky sexual behaviors and cultures (Newmahr, 2010). We use kink as an umbrella term to refer to activities that include the related behaviors of bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) (Newmahr, 2011; Rehor, 2015). Following Newmahr (2011, p. 18), we define kink as "the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional or sensory pleasure." We refer to these activities as "kink" because, as Newmahr (2011) highlights, it appears to be the most popular term in contemporary sexual cultures, and we use the adjective "kinky" to refer to acts of kink or the subcultures in which they occur (see also Rehor, 2015).

Kink activities have traditionally been classed as paraphilias and appear in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as such (APA, 2013; Federoff, Fishell & Federoff, 1999). This has frequently resulted in practitioners being diagnosed as pathological and at risk (Khan, 2014; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005); yet such a model is deeply flawed. Weinberg et al. (1984) contested this pathological approach by interviewing kink practitioners to develop an understanding of their behaviors that was rooted in their social interactions and personal experiences. They argued that five features constitute kink activities: 1) mutual definition; 2) role-playing; 3) a sexual context; 4) consensuality; 5) dominance and submission. While Newmahr (2011) highlights diverse discourses associated with sexual play that problematize these characteristics for some practitioners, particularly related to role-play, we contend that they remain useful ways of conceptualizing kink activities, particularly in gay male sexual subcultures (see Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006).

Building on Rubin's (1991) groundbreaking anthropological study of a BDSM club in San Francisco in which she documented the intricate codes and practices of a particular kink community, recent ethnographic studies demonstrate that kinky sexual practices can be classified as serious leisure. Newmahr (2010, p. 329) discusses how definitions and qualities of serious leisure are found in kink, stating that "the community is a rich and complex social organization constructed around an immersive recreational pursuit." Kink practitioners dedicate a significant amount of time to their activities (Taylor & Ussher, 2001), and the acts involved can require skill and practice (Weiss, 2011).

Yet it is the management of risk which receives the most attention from the literature—not least because of the cultural perception that such practices are inherently dangerous (Rubin, 1984). The term "Safe, Sane and Consensual" (SSC) is popular in kink communities as a way of publically demonstrating an approach to risk management that deals with the concerns of how kink is viewed by society (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). SSC is

used to signify that kink practitioners take necessary precautions (safe), that they understand the risks associated with the acts (sane), and that they agree to participate in the acts (consensual).

However, SSC has been critiqued by many of these communities as it fails to recognize that some kink activities may not be inherently safe, and the term “sane” is seen as pathologizing and arbitrarily decided (Newmahr, 2011). As such, many individuals adopt the terminology of Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) because it is seen to recognize consent and demonstrate in practitioners a considered understanding of the inherent risks of the activities in which they engage (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Williams, Thomas, Prior & Christensen, 2014).

Even so, a significant level of misinformation and stigma pertaining to kinky sexual practices still exists (Khan, 2014). Highlighting this, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (c4) in the United Kingdom banned “extreme” pornographic representations of kinky sexual acts deemed unsafe, without evidence of the risks involved in these acts. Attwood and Smith (2010) demonstrate that the law relies on moralistic and emotional dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex. This stigma is evident in the academic community as well, with research on sex and sexuality deemed “dirty work” (Irvine, 2014)—and research on kink remaining a marginal component of the study of sexualities (Rubin, 2011). This study contributes to the growing literature on kinky sexual practices (e.g. Rehor, 2015) by examining the experiences of people who engage in pup play.

Aims and Objectives

In this exploratory study, our primary aim is to provide an empirically grounded framework of pup play that will enable future research into the behavior as a sexual and social phenomenon. To this end, we first present data on how participants understand pup

play and their routes into engaging in the activity, and then analyze their narratives in order to: 1) explore the extent to which pup play is sexual; 2) examine relaxation and the presence of a “headspace” in pup play; 3) determine whether it is a kink according to Weinberg et al.’s (1984) classificatory schema; and 4) determine whether it is a form of serious leisure according to Newmahr’s (2011) definition.

METHOD

In order to confirm this is the first empirical study on pup play, we undertook a comprehensive search of the literature to ensure that it was not the focus of research elsewhere. We performed searches using the key words “pup play,” “puppy play” and “dog play” alone and in combination with “human,” “kink,” and “bds,” on the following sites: Science Direct, PsycArticles, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. We systematically examined the articles yielded in these searches, ending each search when we reached five continuous pages of results in which each article had no mention of pup play. In summary, 8 academic articles mentioned pup play: 7 referred to it in a list of kinks, and 1 provided a brief conceptual discussion (Aggrawal, 2011). None contained empirical research on pup play.

Given this lack of prior research, we adopted a qualitative approach in this study to acquire narratives, explanations and meanings behind pup play (see Rehor, 2015). As part of this framing, we use symbolic interactionism to analyze the data (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework which privileges peoples’ narratives in understanding a phenomenon, recognizing that the meaning of events is situated within human interactions, the context of these dynamics and how they are interpreted by others. Weinberg (2015) powerfully illustrates the utility of the symbolic interactionist approach to understanding sexuality—not disregarding the biological realities of gender and sexuality, but

recognizing that the meanings associated with bodies, desires and sexual acts are contingent upon how they are interpreted within a social context.

A modified grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2014). Both authors coded the data independently and compared coding for similarity; emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes. Undertaking a form of analysis that Dey (1993) calls middle-range coding, we continued this analysis in conjunction with a more focused search of the literature. As such, we combined our own inductive themes with existing frameworks to develop a “theory of the phenomena” that is both “grounded in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80-81) and engaged with existing literature (Urquhart, 2013). Following this, an independent researcher cross-checked our analysis with five randomly selected transcripts to check internal coherence. It is through the processes of coding, logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigor is assured.

Procedures

Data come from 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with gay and bisexual men who engage in pup play. The sample is limited to these demographics due to the exploratory nature of this study, and because kink cultures are often segregated into heterosexual and sexual minority communities (Newmahr, 2011). In order to recruit participants from different social and sexual networks, we eschewed usual techniques for participant recruitment, such as LGBT groups or community ‘munches,’ as they can result in a sample from a small number of social networks (see McCormack, 2014). Instead, we recruited participants from across the UK using social media, and then snowball sampled from these different subcultural community groups.

The first author made contact with individuals who had pup play related information on their profile on a number of social and sexual networking sites, asking if they would

participate in a research project on pup play. Those who responded positively were provided with additional information, and informed consent was attained. Participants were also asked to suggest others who may be interested in the study. Interviews were mostly conducted in-person by the first author, with 6 being conducted over Skype.

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes, started with demographic information, and included questions about what pup play is; how it is enacted; intimacy and pleasure related to pup play; how participants got involved in pup play and kink more broadly; and how participants navigated their pup identities both online and within social networks. The interviewer engaged in a number of follow-up questions, including probing questions related to participants' responses, meaning that participants were not asked precisely the same questions.

Participants could choose where the interview took place, with most opting for a café or university-based setting. Interviews occurred between December 2014 and April 2015, and were digitally recorded and transcribed. All participants signed consent sheets prior to the interview and ethical procedures of the *American Psychological Association* were followed. Ethical approval was gained from the second author's university. In order to preserve anonymity, participants were assigned with a unique number and we refer to them in this article as P1, P2,..., P30. These numbers were assigned according to the order they were interviewed.

Participant Demographics

Participants were aged 18-35 (mean = 23.73, median = 23) at the time of interview. All participants were Caucasian, cisgendered males, and were based in towns and cities across the UK. Participants came from a mixture of working and middle class backgrounds. See Table 1 for a summary of the demographic information collected.

Insert Table 1 here.

RESULTS

Definitions, Dynamics and Boundaries

All participants argued that pup play referred to social interaction with others, in which at least one person imitated a puppy. For example, P15 said pup play consisted of “acting like a puppy.” P11 provided a definition that exemplified participants’ responses when he said that it involves “someone playing the role of a puppy. Any kind of role-play involving somebody as a puppy is a nice all-encompassing way of putting it.” Similarly, P7 described it as adopting “behaviors that mimic that of a puppy.” Unlike sub-cultural community groups like “bears” and “twinks,” which are oriented around physical characteristics and age (see Lyons & Hosking, 2014), all participants stated that pup play was a form of role-playing activity in which people, of diverse body types and ages, adopted certain characteristics of a young dog.

Participants also discussed a set of behaviors that were central to pup play. P8 said, “Playing games, fetch, head and belly rubs, biting and licking.” P17 described cuddling as a key component, and added, “It’s about moving around on all fours, chasing things, not having to worry about looking silly.” Offering a similar perspective, P1 also included “getting strokes [petted].” Several participants discussed developing their own style of bark, while P10 added, “Tactile behavior, receiving strokes, scratches, belly rubs...maybe asked to play fetch...Sometimes there can be sexual elements to it.”

While a broad set of behaviors were characterized across the sample, participants did not feel compelled to engage in all activities. For example, P9 rejected behaviors like “fetch,” describing himself as “more of a lounge dog.” He added:

I'll walk round and nuzzle up, expect treats, curl up with another pup, give and get strokes, growl when I see somebody I don't like, bark with the doorbell, random things that you would see a dog do and it just builds up.

P12 also distanced himself from a prescribed set of rules, saying, "You just need to think about how a dog would do it, and just roll about and have fun."

"Gear" was deemed to be an important component of pup play for the majority of participants. Items that were commonly included as "pup gear" included: a collar; harness; lead; pup hood (a facial mask normally made of rubber or leather in the shape of a dog) or muzzle; tail (a rubber toy which when inserted into the anus gives the appearance of a tail); knee pads for joint protection; and gloves for hands and feet which restrict finger movement to give the image of paws. While participants stressed gear was not required for pup play, many felt that it greatly enhanced their enjoyment of the activities involved. P19 exemplified the majority of the participants' views, saying:

You don't need gear to do pup play, but a hood and a tail really help you act in the right way. You should also try and use knee pads and some sort of hand protectors for safety. I'm jealous of the guys who have money to spend on great gear, but it's not essential—just nice to have.

P3 was the only participant who felt gear was a necessity, saying, "It's essential. I have the prerequisite puppy uniform of a muzzle, knee pads, boxing gloves for wrist supports, a harness and a jock if I am wearing my tail."

Many participants spoke about doing pup play with others. This would sometimes be one person who simultaneously adopted a pup role, but often included multiple people "pupping out" together. However, a few others discussed the role of a "handler"—a person who adopted the role of the owner of the pup, either for individual "play sessions" or for extended periods of time. Much in the same way that a pet dog has an owner, these

participants described the role of a handler as acting as a caregiver and protector. P4 said, “I like the fact that he tells me what to do and he trains me. I like the whole rules thing, which you wouldn’t get if you were a stray puppy [without a handler].” He added that his handler was “not the type of guy I would normally go for, but he offers that something different to me.”

Participants also demarcated the boundaries of pup play by distancing it from stigmatized cultural associations it has with zoophilia and the furry community. Related to zoophilia, 28 of the 30 participants argued that there were no links, primarily because no animals were involved. For example, P17 said, “Pups are still human beings that are able to make rational choices. For me, there is no link.” Similarly, P6 said, “A dog can’t consent, a human can.” P7 said, “It’s completely different. Bestiality [zoophilia] involves animals, no consent, and it’s illegal.” Some participants were strident in their rejection of any link with zoophilia. For example, P2 said, “It’s ludicrous. It’s people. If a horse puts on a hat and dresses up as a man, they can’t get a job.” It is perhaps for fear of the conflation of pup play with zoophilia that several participants used the term “bio-pups” to refer to biological dogs outside of the context of pup play, in order to distance themselves from the social stigma associated with kink (see Goffman, 1963; Newmahr, 2011).

However, two participants thought some people who engaged in pup play could also maintain sexual attraction for animals. P3 said, “I know two people who have been fucked by dogs who are also into pup play, but that’s the extreme end. Puppy play to me is not bestiality and for the majority of puppies it’s not bestiality.” Similarly, P16 said, “I’d say for some people there is a link.” Even so, he recognized the politically fraught nature of this connection, saying, “A lot of pups get quite touchy about it as they have pets themselves, wouldn’t do it and also the activity is illegal.” No participants in this study said they had

attraction to, or wanted sex with, dogs. It is possible that some people with zoophile desires engage in pup play, but all but two participants in this study strongly rejected the association.

Several participants also distanced themselves from the furry community—individuals who adopt the persona of anthropomorphized animals in social and sexual interactions (see Soh & Cantor, 2015). P14, who identified both as a pup and a furry, said, “Furries are a genre in themselves.” He added, “Furries identify more with the animal and the more aesthetic aspects.” P11 said that because, “Furries anthropomorphize animals, there are lots of different species, not just pups.” He called both pup play and being a furry a “hobby,” arguing that there were similarities, but that pup play was more related to adopting a submissive role. P16 felt that while there were links between the two: “The two communities are quite different in terms of their behavior and the activities that go on.” The distancing from other kink cultures was an important component of how the majority of participants defined pup play.

The distancing from zoophilia and furry community perhaps speaks to identity management practices that result from social stigma (Goffman, 1963). Supporting this idea, participants spoke of disclosing their sexual acts in a strategic and controlled manner (see Bezreh, Weinberg & Edgar, 2012), generally limiting disclosure of involvement in pup play to other pups, primarily through social media. Only a minority discussed pup play with friends not involved in pup play. For example, P10 said, “All of my colleagues know that I am gay, but they don’t know I am a pup. I don’t hide the fact, I just don’t think they need to know.” P5 said, “It would be another thing to explain... I have my pup friends and stuff, but I haven’t told any of my real friends about it, parents, work people, etc.” Similarly, P4 said, “I like the idea that it’s my own little escape place. It’s nice chatting to other pups about pup play online, but I don’t feel the need to share it with anybody.”

A few participants discussed pup play with friends not involved in pup play, but it was common that they told friends who had permissive sexual attitudes. P9 was the only participant who disclosed their involvement with pup play to family members: “I’ve always been very open and not scared to say what I want. When my pup hood arrived, I unwrapped it and showed my dad in excitement.” The strategic and partial disclosure of engaging in pup play suggests that participants perceive it to be stigmatized in the broader culture. While these descriptions could see pup play as a form of play and thus casual leisure (Kelly, 2012), this would not take into account its sexual and kinky characteristics.

Routes into Pup Play

As found with other kink activities (e.g. Chaline, 2010), participants became involved in pup play in diverse ways. The introduction for the majority of participants was through interactions with somebody already involved in pup play. For example, P10 said:

A few years ago, a friend introduced me to some pups...Two of the guys were a couple, and one was licking/nuzzling into the other, things a ‘normal human’ wouldn’t really do. I was intrigued by this and it went on from there.

Similarly, P8 said, “It was something my friends were doing. It looked fun and seemed exciting, so I thought I’d give it a go.”

The other main interactional route into the pup play was through attending more general kink social events (see Newmahr 2011; Rubin, 1991). Several participants described being introduced to pup play in this way. For example, P1 said, “About 10 years ago, I went to a kink club night and saw it there.” P23 said, “I started going to a kink night, and just got to meet other pups. It evolved from there.” Similarly, P6 said, “When I was 18, I started going to kink events and there were people there who were into pup play. It was the first time I started to meet other pups and I started doing baby steps.”

Several participants highlighted the role of gay social networking sites (Gudelunas, 2012). For example, P17 said, “I was browsing Grindr at home and saw a pup on it in gear and it peaked my interest.” P13 said:

I spoke to a pup on Grindr and began talking about how he was a pup. I told him I was interested in kink but I’d never tried pup play before. So I went round to his, we started off as normal, before we started sharing some pup stuff.

A few participants also became involved in pup play through online exposure, such as pornography. P2 said, “Once I found [porn website], they had links to others and I pretty much clicked them all. I found more websites, more information... Discovering pup play came quite early on for me.” Others, but still a minority, highlighted the role of pornographic images on non-pornographic websites, such as Tumblr. P8 said, “I was always in the shadows online watching people and following them... Tumblr played a big role.” P24 said, “It wasn’t hard to stumble across images of pup play. I saw them on Tumblr and they peaked my interest. I started to find more information out about it.” The routes into engaging in pup play were diverse, but did not appear to have broader impact on their understanding or enjoyment of the activity, nor whether they found it sexual.

Locating the Sexual Within Pup Play

While participants agreed on the general characteristics of pup play, difference existed in their perspectives as to whether pup play was sexual: most stated that it was in at least some contexts, while a minority argued that it was never sexual. This is similar to research on kink more broadly which is viewed as having sexual and non-sexual components (Langdrige, 2006).

For 19 of the 30 participants, pup play consisted of both sexual and non-sexual elements. These participants argued that the sexual nature of pup play was dependent on the

particular context. Highlighting this, P8 said, “It depends where you’re doing it,” while P10 said, “Pup play can be made sexual simply by doing it in a sexual setting.” To explain the importance of context, several participants made reference to different norms in pup community settings. For example, ‘Pup Social’ (www.pupsocial.co.uk) is a website for a regular social event in which pup play occurs in groups, and sexual activity is strictly prohibited. Yet more general kink events, such as Collared (see www.clubcollared.com), provide a setting where pup play can be carried out in both sexual and non-sexual ways.

P2 complicated conceptions of the sexual by highlighting that while he found it erotic, he did not want to engage in what he considered sexual activity during pup play. He said, “I can do pup play and not have sex during it. I’ll be horny but won’t *need* sex.” P10 also discussed the border of the sexual, saying, “Whether or not it becomes sexual, I find it erotic...I just find that I’m in a state of arousal, and that’s my body’s natural reaction.”

However, seven of the 30 participants explicitly rejected the notion that pup play is sexual. For these participants, the focus of pup play was to reflect behaviors of actual dogs. P16 said, “It involves behaving as bio-dogs would...Games of fetch, cuddle piles, anything you might imagine dogs to do in their natural environment.” These participants emphasized the playful nature of pup play. For example, P3 said, “There isn’t anything sexual about pup play, not in my opinion. It’s playful... I mean, puppies aren’t sexual by default.” P15 expanded on this saying, “The play that I do is much more focused on puppy play rather than sex play.” These participants primarily interpreted pup play as a source of fun and play rather than sexual activity.

The remaining four participants stated that pup play was always sexual. For P25, this was because the acts themselves were sexually arousing. He said, “It turns me on no end, pup play specifically. I can’t be around it, see it, without being rock solid [erect].” P13 said, “Pup play always has an undertone of sex to it...For me, there has to be a sexual element,

otherwise I don't see much point to it." When asked how pup play is sexual, P1 said, "It plays into the domination and submission element. One person is in control and the other isn't. That's sexual." These participants could not conceive of engaging in pup play in a non-sexual manner. Interestingly, whereas those who rejected the sexual framework emphasized the association with dogs and their behaviors, participants who found pup play primarily sexual eschewed the animal link when discussing the sexual aspect.

Achieving a Pup Headspace

When discussing the non-sexual component of pup play, the majority of participants discussed a pup "headspace" as a central reason for engaging in the behavior. P14 described the headspace as "a basic mindset where you forget or ignore the human thinking part of the brain and go more instinctual." Participants discussed effects relating to a reduction in cognitive processing coupled with more instinctual thought processes. For example, P3 said, "Your thoughts become more sluggish and you react on instinct." Similarly P10 said the headspace was about "giving into your instincts, which feels pretty good to be honest." P17 said, "When I do pup play, sometimes it's an escape from the world into a different mindset...I enjoy not feeling the need to be responsible." While participants used different terminology, such as "pupping out," "pup brain," or "pup mode," their descriptions were similar and "pup headspace" was the predominant label.

Participants differed in the ease with which they were able to get into a pup headspace—a significant majority struggled initially. Only two participants were able to get into the headspace easily. P4 said, "I really get into it... it kind of comes naturally." P12 said, "You clear your mind of one thing and you just fill it up with, 'Okay, I'm on the floor now, what would a dog want right now?' It's not hard." All other participants persevered, and had similar experiences once they attained headspace.

Most participants viewed the headspace as a tool for relaxation. For example, P12 said:

The headspace is relaxing. It's a way of letting go. 'Oh, you have a big interview tomorrow? Who cares, I'm going to act like puppy.' It's also nice the other way around. You're in the middle of a presentation? Who cares, you just need to remember that yesterday you were a puppy crawling on the floor.

Similarly, P18 commented that the headspace was "a relaxing place mentally," while P27 added, "Life is a bit simpler in the headspace—it's nice not to do anything and just relax."

In addition to the headspace, several participants spoke of "pupspace." Describing it as a much deeper form of headspace, these participants became so immersed in pup play that they discussed an alternative consciousness. For example, P14 said, "It's a more intense version of the headspace. You're thinking becomes naturally more animalistic... things enter more naturally, this flow." P3 said, "Pupspace is like subspace. You are completely putting yourself in the hands of the dom, where you are just completely focused on what is happening at the time." When asked to describe pupspace, P8 said:

It's about the time perspective I found. I was playing with pups over the weekend and that lasted quite a few hours, but it didn't feel like that at all. You don't realize it and you have fallen into the headspace.

While the majority of participants had not experienced pupspace, they were all aware of what was meant by the term and most knew somebody who had achieved it. It appears to be a key motivation of participation for the times when pup play is not experienced as a sexual act.

Pup Play as Kink

In order to develop conceptual understanding of pup play as a sexual activity, it is important to consider how it relates to definitions of kink activity. As discussed earlier,

Weinberg et al. (1984) argue there are five key characteristics: 1) mutual definition; 2) role-playing; 3) a sexual context; 4) consensuality; 5) dominance and submission. We contend that pup play conforms to all five components. In the first section, we demonstrated that: 1) participants definitions of pup play concurred (mutual definition); 2) adopting the role of a dog was central to these definitions (role-playing); and 3) the majority of participants found it sexual at least on some occasions (a sexual context).

The importance of consent was also threaded throughout participants' narratives. First, all participants explicitly stated that pup play was consensual. For example, P15 said, "Pup play is consensual. It requires vulnerability, and that can only be given by a person." When asked how he negotiated this consent, he added, "The same as usual [for other kinks]—pre-planning and discussion." Similarly, P6 said, "I think it is consensual. I think that you have to willingly get in that headspace to do pup play."

Consent did not need to be explicitly negotiated in the way described in other kink contexts because of the dynamics inherent within the activity (c.f. Williams et al., 2014). For example, when asked how he negotiated consent, P7 said, "Body language is usually a pretty strong indicator. I could just get up and say no if something non-consensual occurred."

Similarly, P19 said:

You don't really need to have a discussion about what is okay to do and what isn't.

There seems to be a mutual understanding of what is acceptable. If it crosses those boundaries, then you just bark at the pup or handler, or move away.

The lack of explicitly negotiated consent occurred most when the pup play was framed as non-sexual. P30 said, "I've never encountered any issues of consent. Unless I'm going to do other kinks or more sexual stuff—that's when I'll talk beforehand." Thus, whether explicit or implied, pup play was always a consensual activity for participants.

The fifth characteristic of kink is domination and submission. Participants argued pup play was an extension of domination and submission. This was most obvious when participants discussed engaging in pup play with a handler. For example, P12 said, “You can have a handler who’s fairly demanding of what you do and how you act, and if you do it wrong then there’s punishments.” P4 said, “I get off on having a master/handler. It goes into the dom/slave element, I like the fact he tells me what to do and trains me.”

However, participants also discussed dominance and submission when engaging in pup play with other pups. While participants argued that they adopt a submissive role as a pup, the majority also discussed the formation of a hierarchy when engaging in pup play in a group. For example, P20 said, “When I am around other pups, I like to become the Omega—basically I like knowing I am beneath all the other pups.” P8 described himself as a “switchy type of pup,” adding, “I don’t like being in charge of others, but there are certain pups I will tell to do things though. Like Pup [name], we take turns of who is in control of who—we wrestle for the control.”

It was in this context that many participants discussed a “lighter” form of submission. For example, P8 said, “Pup play is less about discipline and more playful. Light sub/dom in a way, but it’s not ‘do this, do that and you will be punished if you don’t.’ There is more leeway to it.” P5 said, “Pup play is a form of submission that is more adaptable than regular BDSM... I think it’s a bit nicer than being a sub and not as full on.” Thus, pup play contains submission and hierarchies of power even if explicit domination is not always present.

Given this complexity related to domination, and the somewhat contested nature of Weinberg et al.’s classification (Newmahr, 2011), we also draw on other evidence to support the notion of pup play as a kink. Most simply, many participants used the label of kink to describe pup play. For example, P19 summarizes the view of most participants when asked if

pup play was a distinct form of kink, saying, “Of course it is a kink. It has its own gear, it appears on kink websites and it’s just generally a part of kinky sex.”

The majority of participants also spoke about how other kinks intersected with pup play (see Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999). Several participants discussed their attraction to rubber. For example, P6 said, “If I am doing full pup play, then usually I am wearing some kind of rubber. That’s just how I choose to do it.” Similarly, P9 commented that he liked “being in rubber when I’m a pup, it’s like you’ve got a new skin.” Others kinks also occurred during pup play. For example, P11 said, “There are some [kinks] you can do with it and some you can’t. Watersports [erotic play involving urine], bondage and stuff just fit quite nicely in.” P3 said, “The other kinks I will do with pup play usually involve CMNM [clothed male naked male]...bondage can come into it too.” Despite overlapping with other kinks, participants highlighted that they considered pup play to be a unique activity. Thus, pup play is a kink both according to participants’ understandings as well as Weinberg et al.’s (1984) classificatory schema.

Pup Play and Leisure Sex

A recent trend in the social scientific study of sexualities is to conceptualize sex as a form of serious leisure (Attwood & Smith, 2013). We explore whether pup play can be framed this way. To do so, we employ Newmahr’s (2010, p. 318) characteristics of serious leisure: 1) a unique ethos of the activity; 2) a personal identification with the leisure activity; 3) the need for perseverance; 4) effort required to learn the activity; 5) durable benefits of the activity; and 6) the possibility to pursue the activity as a career. We argue that four of these characteristics are present, one requires further evidencing and one is not supported.

The 1) unique ethos and 2) personal identification with pup play are self-evident from participants’ narratives and have been demonstrated in previous sections. Related to the need

for 3) perseverance and 4) effort required to learn the activity, participants discussed how they practiced the behaviors performed in pup play. For example, P17 discussed practicing his bark, explaining, “I didn’t want to have a bark that sounded utterly pathetic; some people have really distinct ones. I practiced it in my room on my own to get it right.” P3 practiced the posture of a dog, saying, “Physical challenges certainly come into it. Some people use their knees, but it can be bad for them, so I trained to use my feet. It can be challenging to be gallivanting around on your hands and feet though.”

However, the key way these factors, 3) and 4), were demonstrated was through the difficulty participants’ experienced achieving headspace, and the practice required over a period of time to do so. P13 said, “I find it quite difficult to transition into it, actually. It can take a long time to clear your mind.” When asked about challenges in achieving a headspace, P2 said, “I think too much, little things stop me going into it... I have to really concentrate to achieve [the headspace].” Similarly P15 said, “I find it very difficult to get into the headspace and it takes me a lot of time... I find it difficult if lots of things are happening around me at once.” He added, “It gets easier with practice though.”

Given the absence of data on mental or physical well-being, further research is needed to ascertain whether there are 5) durable benefits to pup play. However, participants argued that it was relaxing and enjoyable and it is quite possible it has benefits in the way some leisure activities do (Tinsley & Eldredge, 1995). For example, P9 said, “My life is very stressful. I work 12-14 hour days and it’s nice not planning anything. You can lounge about without being a pup, but it’s nicer in the headspace.” P13 said, “It’s escaping, you don’t have to worry about work tomorrow.” P1 argued that pup play provided both a space to avoid stresses and also an opportunity to receive affection, saying, “It’s nice not to have to think of anything, just be treated simply. I enjoy not to have to think about anything. It’s nice, it’s like an escape.”

Finally, we do not find general support for the final characteristic, that it can be a career. While two participants discussed “famous” pups they knew of on social networking sites, none of the participants regularly made money or developed a career from pup play. Given this absence, we did not find evidence to label pup play a form of serious leisure—particularly given the playful nature of pup play, discussed earlier. Yet it would also be inappropriate to label it a form of casual leisure, given the strength of the first four characteristics of serious leisure. Thus, following Attwood and Smith (2013), we seek to disrupt the casual/serious leisure binary and argue instead that pup play is best considered a form of leisure sex.

DISCUSSION

This study is the first empirical research on the kinky practice of pup play. By interviewing 30 gay and bisexual men who participate in this activity, we develop an understanding that is rooted in the experiences and narratives of those who engage in pup play. While exploratory in scope, we contend that pup play classifies as kink, tends to be sexual, and is a source of relaxation when framed in a non-sexual way.

This study does not provide evidence for the general classification of pup play as a form of zoophilia (Aggrawal, 2011). Almost all participants were strident in their belief that pup play was not a form of zoophilia, and the two individuals that recognized that some people into pup play might also be attracted to animals saw the two behaviors as distinctly different. Indeed, participants discursively distanced themselves from zoophilia in two ways: 1) they emphasized the *human* aspects of pup play when discussing its sexual nature; and 2) they stressed the *playful* and instinctual nature of pup play when discussing imitating animal behaviors. Further highlighting the distinction between pup play and zoophilia, Williams and Weinberg (2006) provide interview data with men who identify as being zoophilic, and their

participants' narratives of emotional and sexual desire for animals stand in contrast with our participants' disavowal of zoophilia—also highlighting the absence of sexual or emotional desire for dogs in our own participants' narratives. While zoophiles may also engage in pup play, none of the participants in this study disclosed any sexual desire for dogs. Given the nature of our sample, we cannot make definitive claims about the relationship between pup play and zoophilia more broadly, but the general classification that pup play is a form of zoophilia was not supported by our data.

We have also developed an initial classification of pup play in three key ways. First, pup play can be seen as a kink according to Weinberg et al.'s (1984) classification criteria. Secondly, despite the sexual nature of pup play being dependent on the context it is situated, we classify pup play primarily as a sexual activity in accordance with the majority of participants. The focus on the non-sexual elements of pup play for some participants speaks to an interesting disjuncture of people seeking non-sexual fulfillment in sexual contexts. As Newmahr (2011, p. 68) argues, it might be that “another kind of sexual story is proliferating in late modern discourses of sex, one in which the erotic is desexualized.” Even so, pup play is strongly located within the realm of sexual kink for the majority of participants.

Finally, we classify pup play as a form of leisure sex based on our sample. Given its relation to play alongside the four components of serious leisure, it is clearly a form of leisure. Yet labelling it as either casual or serious would be problematic, and given the primarily sexual nature of the activity, we classify it as a form of leisure sex. Further research is needed to clarify the precise characteristics of leisure sex, and the benefits and issues associated with it, yet we still find the term helpful for locating pup play within the matrix of leisure, kink and sexual activity.

A key element of pup play that emerged from interviews was the presence of a pup headspace and pupspace. The latter appears to be a form of “subspace.” Newmahr (2010)

argues that people in subspace experience “flow” when they reach this state. Conceptualized by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow is defined as a state in which people become “so intensely absorbed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Heo, Lee, McCormack & Pedersen, 2010, p. 209). Flow requires mental challenge and the ability to use skills, intense concentration, focus on goals and decreased awareness of external stimuli (Newmahr, 2010). Various forms of serious leisure enable the experience of flow (Stebbins, 2010), and some participants’ narratives suggest pup headspace may be another venue to reach this state. However, pup play is neither as skillful nor as intense as other leisure activities in which flow is attained, so further research is needed to determine whether the feelings experienced amount to flow, and what implications this has for evaluating pup play as a sexual and social activity.

Limitations and Future Directions

We recognize that the limitations of this study mean that it can only be exploratory in nature. Our research focused on defining pup play, understanding how it relates to sexual activity, kink and whether it can be considered a form of leisure. Given the limitations of our sample, quantitative research that tests the generalizability of these findings to a broader population would be a significant addition to the literature.

Our sample is limited to young gay and bisexual men, and while our recruitment strategies suggest this is the primary demographic for pup play, we cannot make definitive statements on this. This sample is restricted to men from the U.K., and pup play may have different dynamics in other countries, not least the U.S. Our sample is limited in respect to age, sexuality, race, class and ethnicity, and future research examining these components would be a valuable addition to the literature. Further analysis of the characteristics of pup play practitioners will also be of interest, including their sexual positioning, gender

expression and simultaneous kink identities they may have. Furthermore, while it is clear that participants frame their behaviors as non-problematic, research examining potential sexual, mental and health issues with pup play would be welcomed, as well as potential resilience factors.

Further research is also needed to examine the dynamics of pup play and the experiences of those who participate in it. Research could investigate whether pup play practitioners are connected with other subcultural groups, such as “bears” and “twinks,” as well as how pup play relates to kink, in terms of culture and demographics. Similarly, our data did not enable systematic examination of whether participants explored more kinks after engaging in pup play.

In summary, the aim of this exploratory study was to provide the first empirical examination of pup play. Findings indicate that pup play is a kink activity which tends to be sexual, based on the setting and context in which it occurs. We have provided empirically grounded descriptions of participants’ understandings of pup play, and have used existing classificatory schema to argue it is both a sexual kinky behavior and a leisure activity; and we contend that it can usefully be conceived as a form of leisure sex.

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